『영어영문학』
제20권 2호(2015.5), 331-350

English and Linguistic Imperialism:
A Korean Perspective in the Age of Globalization

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1. Introduction

English has gradually emerged as the most prominent of the global languages; it is the preferred means of communication for science, academia, media, economics, technology, and international politics. Consequently, English education has become a fundamental component of national curriculums across the globe, with non-native students from all walks of life viewing the ability to speak English as a necessity if they wish to become successful in any number of disparate fields.

Whilst writers such as Crystal (2003) see the globalisation of English as a positive, allowing the international community to communicate with ease, simultaneously increasing global interdependence, others such as Robert Phillipson (1992) see it as an imposition, one that perpetuates the hegemony of English-speaking countries internationally.

The transfer of a dominant language to a non-native culture (by force or otherwise) is commonly described as 'linguistic imperialism'. The term was first popularised by Phillipson (1992: 47). He gives the following definition:

> ... the dominance asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between

English and other languages.

Phillipson maintains that certain languages dominate internationally, often at the expense of an adoptee nation's ancestral language and cultural identity. In particular, the diffusion of English has resulted in a cultural imbalance, one that serves to strengthen "traditional" English speaking countries such as America and the United Kingdom, at the expense of those where English is an emerging or second language (L2).

This paper aims to identify potential indicators of linguistic imperialism and the reasons for the dominance of the English language, specifically in relation to South Korea (henceforth Korea). A largely monolingual and homogenous nation with a relatively short tradition of English use, Korea has fully embraced the learning of English as a Second Language (ESL). So much so that Koreans spend $15-17 billion annually on English education (Song, 2011; Jeon, 2012).

2. English as a global language

2.1 A language on which the sun never sets

Throughout history the main driving forces behind the movement of language have been trade and colonial expansionism. By the dawn of the sixteenth century, a desire to increase political and economic power led to several European nations dominating the international landscape for over four hundred years. During this time, wars were fought, treaties were signed, and colonies frequently changed hands, with Britain eventually emerging as the most prominent and expansive world power.

Indeed, the spread of language has proved to be one of the most enduring

legacies of British colonisation. Administrators, traders, settlers, and servicemen spread English far and wide, from the colonies of North America, to trade posts in South Asia and beyond (Phillipson, 2008b). Eventually, the English language became a powerful tool, used to control and anglicise indigenous populations, whilst aiding in the exploitation of local resources for the gain of the Empire (Schneider, 2011).

Consequently, it is important to note that English did not developed into the world's most influential language due to linguistic superiority over "ethnic" vernaculars. Rather, it is simply a case of being in the "right place at the right time" (Crystal, 2003: 78).

Whilst English's current status as the world's bridging language (or *lingua franca*) can trace its roots back to British colonial expansion. By the mid-twentieth century, it was the emergence of one of Britain's former colonies as an economic and political superpower that cemented English's status as the international de facto standard.

Although Britain was waning due to a loss of territory and fighting several debilitating wars, America had consolidated and began to spread her influence. By the end of the Cold War, American cultural impact was unmatched; its economy had become the world's largest, with multinational corporations spreading English as the language of business and finance. Furthermore, Hollywood movies, TV serials, and music found a worldwide audience, allowing English to embed itself via popular forms of media and entertainment (Schneider, 2011).

After losing their empire and much of the resources that it provided, the British came to realise that the English language was a commodity of increasing value. Accordingly, the United Kingdom government founded the British Council in 1934, the purpose of which was to promulgate British culture and the English language through education and the arts. Today, the British Council is one of the world's largest English language teaching

organisations and has a presence in over 100 countries worldwide. Meanwhile, the English language teaching (ELT) sector is directly responsible for earning the UK £1.3 billion per annum (Graddol, 2006).

Proponents of linguistic imperialism theory identify the British Council as a major contributor to English language hegemony and thus language imperialism in general. In *Macaulay Alive and Kicking* (2012), Phillipson criticises the British Council (and Graddol in particular) for promoting English as a commercial interest. Describing the British Council's use of English's to assimilate and restructure L2 students as "*global linguistic apartheid*". (p. 11)

What's more, Phillipson (2008a) interprets the globalisation of English as the "*Anglo-American civilising mission of the 20th Century*" (p. 263), in which the colonial wars and thirst for land of the past have been replaced by linguistic and cultural subjugation. One empire has simply been replaced by another in a case of *neo-colonialism*.

Pennycook (1994) takes a somewhat more balanced view; whilst he identifies the direct relationship between Western expansionism and the spread of English, he also criticises Phillipson's earlier work in *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992) for not recognising English's role as a language of protest: "It becomes important to acknowledge (English) not merely as a language of imperialism, but also as a language of opposition."(p. 262)

Using the example of colonial-era India, it was the English language that exposed Indians to western ideals such as democracy and self-government. English gave Indian nationalists both the language *and* the theory to communicate their discontent internationally (Anderson, 2012).

In David Crystal's *English as a Global Language* (2003), he too recognises the legacy of colonialism, yet argues that English allows developing nations to achieve international goals such as increased trade and a voice in world affairs, thereby resulting in the 'have nots'eroding the distance from the 'haves'. Widdowson (1998) expands on Crystal's point by highlighting the

issue of choice vs. force. If English language hegemony exists, he states that direct pressure from an external agent is required, whereas in reality, each nation possesses and exercises freedom of choice.

2.2 Kachru's 'three circles'

Perhaps the most influential and widely-accepted method of explaining the historic spread of English is Indian-born linguist Braj Kachru's (1982) "Three Circles of English" model (see figure 1).

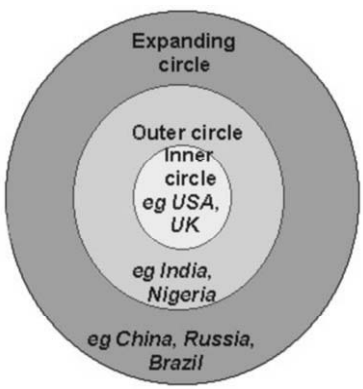

Figure 1. Kachru's three circles model

This representation of movement (and varieties) of English presents three concentric circles, the innermost of which is labelled the 'inner circle'. Contained within are the countries that spread and adopted English during the first diaspora. During this period around 25,000 people, mainly from the South of England, migrated to North America and Australasia (Jenkins, 2009). These countries are viewed as the historical footholds of English, and include The UK and Ireland, USA, Australia, New Zealand, and Anglophone Canada. The number of people who use English as a first language (L1) in these

territories is estimated to be around 330 million (Hall, 2011).

Linguistic puritans (Prator, 1968; Quirk, 1990) view these nations as the norm-providers of the English language, guardians whose role is to maintain the respect of "authentic" English via the enforcement of western standards. Those that prescribe to this ideal are identified as being advocates of linguistic imperialism, for if authenticity can only be judged by insiders, the result is the perpetuation of language hegemony and self-interest.

The next stage is labelled the 'outer circle' and presents countries that were affected by Britain's expansion during the second diaspora. These states are mainly from Africa and South Asia and include Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, S. Africa, India, and Pakistan. The colonisation of these countries led to the gradual development of a number of second language varieties, with these "New Englishes" becoming locked in battles of power and prestige with mother tongues. Whilst some cultures would embrace New Englishes, others saw them as sources of shame.

The final, outermost, section is named the 'expanding circle'. These are countries where English has no historical function and were mainly left unaffected by British imperialism, yet still use English as a lingua franca. Examples of them include China, Japan, Korea, Russia, and most European nations. According to Hall (2011), the number of people using English as a lingua franca is thought to be as high as one billion.

Those that see linguistic imperialism as a tangible threat to local customs and language would identify 'inner circle' countries as exercising economic and cultural control over those from within 'outer' and 'expanding' ones. Through far-reaching organisations such as the British Council, America's Peace Corps, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), traditional English speaking countries apply an increasing amount of pressure, allowing western interests and 'inner circle English' to dominate modern ELT and business practices.

Korea's status as an expanding circle nation has not prevented English becoming an integral component of its educational and financial strategies. English holds neither official language status, nor is it a second language that has become important for the institutional purposes of government. Many, however, regard English as a valuable tool for ensuring Korea's continued economic prosperity (Flattery, 2007).

3. Historical perspective on English

3.1 Korea and the beginnings of English

The history of ELT in Korea can trace its roots to the late 19th century. Until 1876, Korea was an isolationist 'hermit' state and one that had little contact with non-Asian nations. It wasn't until the Japanese forced King (later emperor) Gojong[1] to sign the unequal Treaty of Ganghwa that Korea opened her doors to Western and Japanese influence (Dittrich, 2013).

The Joseon Dynasty, which had historically espoused the Confucian ideal of learning as a way of gaining status (Seth, 2006), then initiated educational reform. By 1883, the country's first ELT institutions had been inaugurated, following the Korean-American treaty which had been signed a year earlier (Kim, 2011). The Tongmunhak (common script learning school) and Wonsan Haksa (Wonsan academy) were the first such establishments, and were set up in order to train interpreters and offer private education, respectively.

These were soon followed by the Yugyong-kongwon (Royal College), Korea's first school by modern standards, in 1886 (Yi, 1984). The faculty mainly consisted of American Protestant missionaries, with the college being

1) All Romanisation of Hangeul uses the official 'Revised Romanisation of Korean' system.

used to Christianise Koreans in addition to teaching them language skills. On May 16th of the same year, the bilingual TongnipSinmun (The Independent) became the country's first newspaper (Dittrich, 2013).

Within a single decade Korea had been transformed from an isolationist state into one besieged territorially, politically, culturally, spiritually, and academically from colonialist nations. When analysing Korea and linguistic imperialism, this period is evidently of great significance, and, in some ways, the birth of "modern" Korea (Cummings, 2005).

Japan slowly began to exhibit its military might and, by 1910, had tightened its grip by annexing Korea. During this period, the Japanese attempted to subjugate Koreans by assimilating them into their own culture. Government sanctioned ELT and Korean language classes were abandoned in favour of adopting Japanese as the national language. For the next decade, learning Korean was illegal in the only country in which it was used.

Whilst English may have been a junior partner during this time, Korea almost became victim to linguistic imperialism on the grandest of scales. The Japanese actively sought to kill the Korean language and, given that this only occurred a century ago, one can fully understand why Korean traditionalists may be concerned about the influence of foreign languages on modern Korea. By the end of the Second World War, Japan was forced to relinquish its empire, ending decades of imperial occupation. It should be noted, however, that the Japanese left a legacy of modernisation, such as a health care system, heavy industry and transport infrastructures, and a culture of efficient bureaucracy (Cummings, 2005). By forcing Korea to interact with Western nations, they had also opened up the peninsula to globalisation (Estok, 2013). Indeed, the great irony of Japan's colonisation is that it laid the foundations for Korea's gradual ascension,[2] eventually leading to the emergence of a new

2) A highly contentious issue in contemporary Korea, with many nationalists believing that Korea would have progressed regardless of Japanese interference. For further reading see:

major industrial force in East Asia that would vastly outstrip their former colonial overlords.

3.2 Establishing English in Korea

Following liberation and the establishment of the First Republic of Korea in 1948, occupying Americans were able to lay the political groundwork that would last up until the 1960s (Kim, 2011). Under the dictatorship of President Park Chung-Hee, much of the country's infrastructure was replaced and an open market was then established.

In 1970, the SaemaeulUndong (or: new community movement) was initiated. As a strategy to modernise the rural Korean economy and further rebuild infrastructure destroyed during the Korean War, it encouraged the traditions of communalism and collaboration, with entire villages and townships joining together to rebuild and rejuvenate a dilapidated Korea. Park also placed a strong emphasis on education, displaying a willingness to invest in 'human capital'. This resulted in a highly-trained workforce, with many Koreans receiving a US-funded Western education in technical areas such as economics and engineering.

As Koreans strived to become more cosmopolitan in the wake of democracy, English increasingly became a sign of sophistication and modernity (Baik, 1992). By the mid-1980s, the Korean government slowly began to relinquish control over the financial system and actively encouraged the population to learn English. Soon, ELT began to take a more prominent role in secondary and tertiary education as Korea sought to become part of the international elite (Kim, 2011).

By manipulating nationalistic sentiment and promoting scholarship, Park

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Cummings (2005).

exemplified the traditional Confucian ideals of civic national identity and a respect for education. These qualities are still apparent today, having defined Korea for centuries. They also provide insight as to why many contemporary Koreans have embraced English; in the age of globalisation, it is study that will strengthen the homeland.

4. Contemporary Issues on English

4.1 Study hard and succeed: education and industry

Over the past five decades, Korea's economy has grown from the world's poorest to 12th largest, producing a GDP of $1,156 billion (Forbes, 2014). The period of exponential economic growth between 1961 and 1996 (see figure 2) is commonly referred to as the "*Miracle on the Han River*".

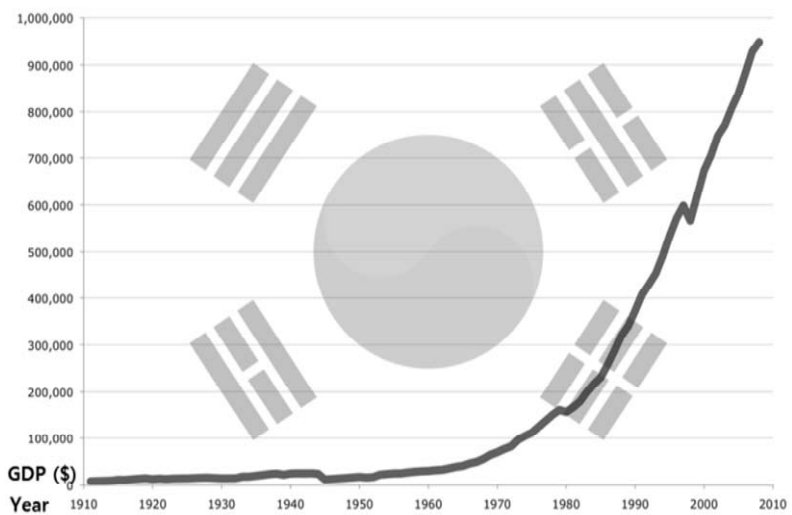

Figure 2. South Korea's GDP (nominal) growth 1960-2007

A country with almost no natural resources had transformed into a world leader in mineral processing, fabrication, and technological development. By 1997, however, the Asian financial crisis had thrown the country in chaos. This forced Korea to embark on a series of massive economic reforms, opening up the country to foreign investment and further globalisation.

At the start of the new millennium, freshly-elected Korean president Lee Myung-Bak referred to the global landscape as a "battlefield" with English being "a key weapon for survival", without which Korea would perish (Lee, Han, and McKerrow, 2010). His rhetoric identified English proficiency as a means to achieving a competitive edge in a globalised world where only the fittest survive.

Prior to assuming the presidency in 2008, Lee announced that he would implement an 'English immersion policy' in which all classes nationwide would be taught using English only. This proved to be an unpopular move and drew protests from traditionalists, parents and teachers alike, eventually leading to its cancellation.

However, this policy merely reflected the realities found in both Korean industry and higher education. For Example, the country's two elite technical universities, KAIST and POSTECH, both instruct using English as the main language of communication. Whilst Song (2011: 42) reported that:"over 90% of employees in manufacturing and export industries are continuously assessed for their English competence."

Lee's initiative clearly acknowledged the unequal relationship between the English-speaking West and Korea, without challenging it or the hegemony of English in general. Rather, he seemed to condone it; for Korea to empower itself, it must master Western tools, becoming a slave in the process.

Given the clear link between education and economy, it is no surprise to learn that English has become an important predictor of socio-economic mobility and a highlighter of the discrepancies between social classes. Two

admirable aims of Lee's policy were to relieve parents of the financial burden of English education and to address the 'English divide' between underprivileged and wealthy students (Jeon, 2012). A report by Kim (2012: 3) found that: "Seventy percent of students from families earning 5 million won or more a month received private English education in 2010, fully 3.5 times the 20% from those earning less than 1 million won."

Although English has allowed Korea to shorten the distance between the "haves" and "have nots" on the international platform, many Koreans from low-income households still struggle with an ever-widening gap. English ability is strongly influenced by social factors, whilst its use as a screening mechanism for entrance to prestigious universities and companies indicate a significant divide in terms of equality of opportunity. If English is the key to gaining well-paid employment, it is predominantly graduates from privileged backgrounds that possess the ability to unlock those doors.

Bearing this in mind, one finds oneself wondering whether David Crystal (2003) is correct in his conviction that English is a tool of empowerment for the subjugated and marginalised. Korea has benefited greatly from the dealings of transnational companies such as Samsung, LG, and Hyundai, with English being an important component of that success. The international gap may have narrowed, but at what cost to Korean society?

The use of English as a 'weapon' on a globalised battlefield perpetuates English language hegemony and Western economic dominance. If a government forces that weapon into the hands of students and employees, are they not then subjugated? If access to elite universities and well-paid jobs are the preserve of the wealthy, are others not marginalised?

Education is a basic human right; when a democracy identifies English as a critical component of their educational and economic strategies, it then has a responsibility to ensure that all of its citizens have the same level of access.

4.2 Language and Culture

Due to the nature of the Korean language and culture, it would be remiss to separate them. A largely homogeneous, racially uniformed society, Koreans take great pride in their language, even celebrating a national holiday every October in honour of their native alphabet, *Hangeul* (literally: great script).

For the most part, Koreans also remain committed to the notion of a "*racially defined national identity*" (Estok, 2013, p. 8). In a survey conducted in 2000, over 90% of Koreans believed in a single, unifying bloodline (*danilminjok*) from which all Koreans are descended (Chang, Hyun-ho, and Baker, 2008). This belief system signifies a deeply tribal outlook and sense of cultural unity.

Whilst the concept of ethnic nationalism may seem racist or xenophobic to Western cultures, it has been an important component of Korean growth, rather than the hubristic outcome of recent achievement (see: *Establishing 'modern' Korea*).

Korean traditionalists (Lee, Han, and McKerrow, 2010) are increasingly worried about the dilution of national identity and the loss of Korean's sovereignty due to foreign linguistic influence. To fully understand their concerns, one must first note the cultural and language differences between English speaking countries and Korea.

An extremely hierarchical society, Korea promotes the Confucian ideal of respect for one's elders and social superiors above all else. This is reflected in language use, where honorifics are employed depending on age, gender, and societal role (Jung, Stang, Ferko, and Han, 2011).

As they become more exposed to liberalism through travel, western media, & the internet, younger Koreans are increasingly associating the language with conservatism and archaic values. Lee (2004: 429), for example, notes that there is a trend in youngsters utilizing English for "stylistic purposes, asserting their liberated self and exercising freedom of speech".

Given the lack of honorifics or role as a system of codifying social status, English could be interpreted as being more democratic to those accustomed to exercising filial piety via language (Jambor, 2007). Conversely, those holding traditional values may characterise English use as disrespectful and "un-Korean". Indeed, the traditional notion of *Koreaness* - or what it is to be Korean - seems, on the surface, quite straightforward; only things that originate in Korea can ever be *truly Korean*.

The diversification of the Korean language is another matter that has provided consternation.[3] Often regarded as a New English, "Konglish" (a sometime pejorative) was birthed via increased contact between native Korean and English. Konglish often refers to lexical items that have been loaned or adapted from English and creatively used in a Korean context, usually utilising simplified words and phrases that may be hybridised between the two languages.

Konglish is commonly adopted by youngsters or advertisers in an effort to appeal to the zeitgeist. Consequently, if a popular foreign concept has no Korean language equivalent, it has become useful to simply integrate or adapt the original English form. Examples include; *kape* (café), *keuriseumaseu* (Christmas), and *eeokeon* (air conditioner). An example of hybridisation would be the popular youth term *menbung*, a portmanteau of the English *'mental'* and Korean *'bung-goe'* (meaning breakdown or deconstruct). It is commonly used to signal shock or dismay, usually due to intense study.

Whilst it is increasingly seen as liberating or fashionable to use Konglish, Lee (2004) also notes that the incorporation of English into Korean popular media has resulted in increased intelligibility in other regions and the enhancement of Korea's profile worldwide.

It is not just youngsters and entertainers that advocate English use.

3) For example, see this 2012 article from The Korean Times: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinon/2012/02/137_104323.html

However, scholars began calling for it to be recognised as an official language (EOL) in the late 1990s. The "official language debate" was mainly fuelled by the works of author Bok Geo-il (1998), who, in response to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, promoted the adoption of EOL in the hope that it would reduce future social and political costs in the face of an increasingly inter-reliant global community. He maintained that English is simply a neutral tool, one that should be judged purely on its value to Korean society rather than linguistic or nationalistic ideologies.

The very notion that Koreans should adopt a foreign language to improve their nation's international standing sheds light on why Koreans may feel conflicted. Song (2011: 41) notes:"The ideology of externalisation highlights the otherness of English, the concept antithetical to Koreaness."

For a people who rebuilt an entire country in forty years, doing so motivated by traditional Korean ideals, reliance on something so foreign must be disconcerting. The advancement of English into numerous Korean domains, such as education, industry, language, and media; its promotion by the Korean government; and wide-spread adoption by citizens have all changed the modern Korean landscape. This could be interpreted as signalling the early stages of language shift, something that clearly worries Korean traditionalists.

Although some Korean academics recognise English's neutrality, the language remains hegemonic due to the international prestige associated with it in comparison to Korean. Additionally, the idea that a language actively pursued by Korea can never be truly imperialistic simply does not hold true. A history of Japanese and American interference had a major effect on the country's cultural and linguistic landscape, helping trigger Korea's English language aspirations. Moreover, whether a nation joins a (linguistic) Empire through choice or force, the result is still the same; the adoption of a dominant language foreign to one's own.

5. Concluding remarks

Globalisers often promote English as a neutral tool synonymous with modernity and economic development. In the case of Korea, however, it has also transformed what it means to be a citizen in the global era. Whilst the traditional Confucian ideals of scholarship and a civic national identity remain, English ability is now an important indicator of one's worth to Korean society. To a nation that has a tradition of cultural self-sufficiency, the widespread adoption of a foreign language marks a massive departure from the norm.

Whilst this newly-found flexibility is to be applauded, it is important to strike a balance between the commonality of globalisation and the uniqueness of Korean society. Given the history of linguistic oppression provided by both Japan and the West, and the Korean language's cultural role in a heavily Confucian society, one can fully understand why traditionalists are consciously trying to maintain language sovereignty. After all, it is language that manifests the history, culture, and spirit of its speakers.

Furthermore, whilst Korea has obtained greater prominence on the international stage, the use of English as a means of achieving this signifies a reluctance to challenge both inner-circle hegemony and the increasingly apparent class divide in Korean society. 'Koreaness' has traditionally espoused sacrifice for the good of the collective; with this ideology in mind, one wonders how many are willing to be marginalised and to what extent Korean language and culture must be diluted before the dominance of the English language becomes a major issue.

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<국문초록>

영어와 언어 제국주의: 국제화 시대의 한국 관점

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이 논문에서는 영어가 한국 사회에 어떤 영향을 미쳤는지 탐구하고, 한국이 영어를 받아들인 것이 언어 제국주의의 예인지의 여부를 논의한다. 영어가 제국

주의적 언어인지의 여부에 관해 두 가지 지배적인 입장이 있다. 첫 번째 입장에서는 영어의 확산을 '핵심층' 국가들의 경제적·정치적 문제의 이유 때문에 현지 문화와 언어를 파괴시키는 기폭제로 인식한다. 이와 반대로 두 번째 입장에서는 영어를 문화적 산물로 수용하여 우리 스스로 우리 자신의 선택을 할 수 있고, 영어는 단순히 실제로 국제적 상호의존성을 촉진시키는 순수한 매체일 뿐이라고 주장한다. 전통적인 유교 사상이 아직 한국 사회에서 중요한 요소로 작용하는 상황에서, 영어가 한국의 언어와 문화로 침투한 것과 결부하여 국제화는 국제화 시대에 한국 시민의 정체성을 변형시키고 있다. 영어 교육에 대한 강렬한 의욕은 한국 산업의 놀랄만한 성장을 이룬 시대와 맞물렸지만, 한편으로는 사교육을 감당할 수 없는 사람들을 사회 진보에서 처지게 하면서 점점 벌어지는 계층 분열을 촉진시켰다. 더 나아가, 영어와 핵심층 국가들의 패권은 한국의 교육과 산업 정책의 지원을 받아서 한층 더 강력해지고 있다.

주제어 : 언어 제국주의, 영어의 헤게모니, 세계 영어, 국제화

접수일: 2015. 3. 27
수정일: 2015. 5. 11
게재확정일: 2015. 5. 20